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WOLF MOON

A ROMANCE OF THE GREAT
SOUTHWEST

BY JOSEPH J. QUINN

CHAPTER IV.

INDIAN OR GYPSY?

Fear harnessed for a moment Bluebonnet's pulsating heart until it throbbed haltingly. The same light she had often seen in the depths of Pemella's eyes glinted from those of the stranger's in front of her. In her sudden awakening she had believed him Pemella. Then as her senses cleared, she perceived that she was mistaken. But there was a strong resemblance, the same Grecian features, the coppery skin, the sinister expression twisted into a snarl. When his face broke into a faint leering smile she felt she were once again in Pemella's grasp. Ten feet away this big stranger sat upon his coal black pony and leaned toward her as if watching an animal stirring in the grass. Blue smoke from his cigarette and the arched face and as he glared through it his eyes narrowed into slits that let light through in a row of cellar windows. Evidently he had just seen her for a look of surprise preceded his sickly smile. His horse, too, pricked his ears sharply and set them in Bluebonnet's direction. It was this cue that had caused the man to look inside the car.

Tulane Baisan was not slow to see that this was a novel creature in Texas county. Unmistakably she was a gypsy although she lacked the characteristic color. He had seen thousands of them before and knew their traits. This, he thought, was a stolen child. That she had left a gypsy camp could be ascertained by the fantastic colors of her dress and the arched face and as he black upon her muscles. Never before had he seen a bare-legged girl huddled in a freight car. That is why he crouched over his saddle as a prospector bending over a find of gold. It did not take him long to realize that she was the prettiest creature on whom he had ever gazed. He had branded cattle from the Cimarron to the Brazos and even up into Colorado and Wyoming but during all his life in the sage country he had never come across such a wonder as this. Her large blue eyes brought to him the color of the skies that come with droughts, as blue as the mazarine Gulf at Galveston. He had seen sweet-faced girls like this one along the beach in the coast city years ago. There was something tenderly human and refined about her as if crystallized from some higher substance.

A strange sense of possession took hold of Tulane. He had experienced it before when he had come across some wild, unriden broncho on the range. The wilder, more unmanageable it was the greater swelled his desire for possession. Then, too, when he had come to H ranch in Texas county he had spotted the horse he was now riding and given his gypsy gratis for a period to call Nep his own. Now this same feeling swept over him again as this strange girl stood before him in the car. He wanted her as his own, to place his rough lips close to hers, to fondle her face and arms. He gloated with the desire of having a beautiful creature as this to stamp as his, to move her will, to urge her to this and that as he would his pony.

Tulane slid from his mount and slouched to the car. Bluebonnet recoiled a step but stopped as Tulane smiled. There was something magnetic about him, an undefinable length that transfixed her as in a spell. "Kinda strange to see a miss like you here so early in the mornin'," drawled the stranger. "I'm lost. I really don't know where I am," Bluebonnet confessed, gripped with intuitive fear at his approach. "Wal, Ah reckon Ah kin tell you. You're in Texas county and this heah town is Terit'n. Might you come along to the ranch? Mrs. Trichell she'll be purty glad to fix you up."

Bluebonnet hesitated for a moment. There was something about him at once repulsive and attractive. Perhaps this stranger's appearance was providential. Yet, the thought of being led away by him was not welcome. Bluebonnet entertained a suspicion that he was a spy of a wandering gypsy outfit and that Pemella had by some means gotten into communication with him. Would she be led back to another gypsy camp and held until Pemella arrived? Yet what if she refused to go with him? It might incense this stranger who she noticed carried a gun slung low at his hip. She decided it would be better to accept his proffered kindness, to trust to his honesty and follow him. "Yes, I'll go," Bluebonnet accepted with an assumed glint of pleasure. "How far is the ranch?" "Wal, now, some folks calls it three miles but to us hosses we calls it aroun' the bend. Ah reckon you're not 'quainted in these parts?" Bluebonnet jumped to the ground while Tulane's glowing eye ranged over her from head to foot. Then he mounted Nep and pulled Bluebonnet up back of him.

"Nep as a rule ain't a carin' for extra loads but Ah reckon he won't mind you." Tulane was pleased with his sense of humor. "Where did you say you was from?" Bluebonnet surmised the question. She met it with the indifferent answer: "Oh, I've been in Denver." "Where? All the way from Denver to heah on a freight. Purty far ride for such a youngs. Ah been in Col'rado. Punched cattle down near Durango."

"Do you like Denver?" questioned Bluebonnet, aiming to throw him from further questioning whence she came. "Hump! Lot's better than this heah country. Yuh'll too. Nothing to this but wind an' sand an' dust. But Ah reckon Ah ain't sorry Ah come now." He turned his face to show his purposeful smile to Bluebonnet. A pang of uneasiness gripped her heart and she automatically felt herself draw away from him. He was becoming more and more repugnant.

"Thar's the ranch. See it nar the cottonwoods. Don't know what made me git up so early this mornin'." Ahm used to gittin' the mail but Ah jest naturally shook myself early. Ole man Hunter neer settin' a-watchin' the sun come up when Number 2 whistles way back. Pulls in at Terit'n to let the mail get by. Ah heers Nep snortin' queer like and twistin' them big ears of his and Ah makes for my gun. Then Ah sees a bundle of color move. Sort 'a thought it was a Navajo blanket throwin' a fit at first. Ah looks closer and Ah sees you rub your eyes and then Ah begins to rub mah eyes and perk up a little. Pears to me now you looked skeert of somethin'."

"Yes, I was at first." Then hastening to divert his attention she asked, "By the way did you say Mrs. Trichell owns the ranch?" "Wal, she and ole man Trichell. He's a case too. Laziest cuss alive. Cattle thieves will keel him over yit. But some day—wal just wait. He's had more than one run-in with ole man Garrett and Garrett ain't a-wastin' any love on the ole man. They'll draw in close quarters and the quickest will walk off livin'." Me and the ole man don't pull well 'eitha. He's forever pesterin' me 'bout things. Ah has a powerful smooth piece of handle on mah gun that's waitin' a notch. Ah mighty nigh plugged him onct and he'd a better mind his own bizz. Ah ain't a likin' him."

They had come to the grove of cottonwoods and catpaws that shaded the Trichell homestead. Tulane's arrival with a pretty girl that early in the morning brought the cowboys out of the bunk house pell mell. In a group they watched Tulane ride up with a stiffness and pride that was comic. There was a yip of surprise from Seth Hopkins, the oldest rider. Mrs. Trichell appeared at the kitchen door, a picture of amazement. Above her head appeared a cloud of blue smoke that slowly circled into the fresh morning air, a testimony that she was cooking breakfast for the hungry hands.

The sight of the young girl dressed in gypsy fashion sitting astride Tulane's pony startled her. It was her cry that made John Trichell wheel his rolling chair into the kitchen in double haste.

The Trichells were well and favorably known in Texas county. They had bought their large ranch from a friend who had acquired it when No Man's Land opened up in the early nineties. For forty head of cattle he had increased his stock to twenty-five hundred. Occasionally a Northern took its toll and once a cyclone drew its destructive length across the section. But it was commonly said that Trichell was the luckiest man in Texas county. His buffalo grass stood up well during the long droughts of summer and early autumn. At times his cattle went lean but they were the earliest of all to fatten in the short grass country. His name was known at the stockyards of Chicago, Kansas City, Omaha, Oklahoma City, wherever dealers congregated to speak of beef. His industry, probity and justice had gained for him a reputation that spread from one end of the Strip to the other. His water holes never went dry; his cattle were always the sleekest. But this fact was known to the rustlers also, to whom fat cattle were blue-ribbon prizes. It was while protecting his stock from depredations that Trichell had been wounded years before. He was found unconscious in Navajo Gulch hours later. Trichell recovered but it was found necessary to amputate both legs above the knees. Thence on he directed the ranch activities from his wheel chair. The shock of the fight had turned his hair prematurely gray and deepened the wrinkles in his face. But he never complained. True, many had said the accident had hardened Trichell, made him another man over night. He had gained a reputation for being stern and a driver of men but with the exception of Tulane Baisan and a few riders, whom he had been forced to dismiss, the boys at the Trichell ranch were particularly well satisfied. From under the cottonwood grove in summer he could see his cowboys riding among the cattle in the distance and inspecting fences. And when the biting winds swept over the Panhandle he sat blanketed near the high window of the living room,

musng over the experiences of past days. It was a penance for John Trichell to be inactive and confined to his home but his misfortune was softened by his memories. He could recall a thousand nights spent among his cattle, nights when rain fell and froze into icy pellets on his stock, plating the earth with inches of sleet; nights, too, when wolves in packs harassed the weaker calves. There were attacks, too, from rustlers who cut out choice beaves, just a few, and hurried them away in the darkness. He dared not pursue for he knew only too well that companion thieves were watching for this chance to swoop down on the unprotected herd and slice away a score of heads. Then, there were August days spent out in the open when the sun burnt the land into a ball of dust and red-hot sand, when the cattle wandered lazily seeking protection from the coppery sky and the tropical breath of summer, their hides bronzed to a brighter red by the blistering rays.

Here's a young miss to see you, Mrs. Trichell. Came all the way from Denver. But she ain't sayin' much," blurted out Tulane, as he stopped near the door. Mrs. Trichell approached Bluebonnet, who had slidden to the ground. Something about the young girl's appearance won pity from her heart. She wanted to ply this pretty little creature with questions but with all the amazed riders standing around she perceived how tactless this would be. "I'm so glad to meet someone like you. I'm lost but I will tell you everything," Bluebonnet spoke gently so that she could be heard by Mrs. Trichell alone.

"Don't bother, my little child. Come right inside. You're just in time for breakfast. I know you haven't eaten a bite." Bluebonnet was ushered into Mrs. Trichell's large room. She felt like kneeling before this sweet faced lady. With a woman's intuition she trusted her and was prompted to tell her everything without restraint.

Mrs. Trichell, observing the sensitiveness of the girl, deliberately detained her in her room until the riders had breakfasted. They took an unusually long time to eat this morning and cast curious glances toward the living room door. Even after they had eaten they lingered longer than customary on the outside hoping to catch a glimpse of the fairy vision. In the days that followed Bluebonnet told all to her new found mother. She painted the picture of gypsy life, of the tyrant Nava, of their intention of forcing her to marry Pemella, of her escape and wild trip through the night, and lastly, of her meeting with Tulane.

AT THE STATION

The incident which I am now about to relate, and which is strictly true in every detail, occurred a good many years ago, when I was assistant priest in an unpretending village in South Germany, and about two miles away from the nearest railway station. It was one night in the month of October, if I remember aright, that at the close of a very trying day I laid my weary head upon the pillow with the prayer that God in His mercy would grant "patience, rest, and kind relief" to all the sick and suffering. Let me add that I wished that our household might rest peacefully that night. There was good reason for the last petition, for I was much exhausted, and the night bell in the presbytery is apt to be rather a disturbing element, which seems to take pleasure in rousing the inmates at dead of night, ringing up the unfortunate curate, summoning him to leave his bed and hurry out in obedience to a sick call. My wish on that particular night was not destined to be fulfilled; perhaps because it was dictated rather by love of ease than by charity.

It was a cold night, but I soon got thoroughly warm under the blankets. The latest thing I heard before I lost consciousness was the panting of the last train—a goods train—as it slowly into the distant station. Suddenly I was startled by a shrill sound. Was I dreaming, or was that the tongue of the night, or clanging through the house? I listened a few seconds, holding my breath. No, I was not mistaken; there it was again, louder than before—a cry of distress, an entreaty for help.

Throwing on my clothes, I drew aside the curtain and flung the window open. "Who is there?" I cried. No answer came; the cold night wind blew in my face and made me shiver. "Who is there?" I inquired again. It was too dark for me to see any one, but I heard the sound of footsteps upon the gravel, as if someone was stepping back from the door in order to look up at the window more easily. "Is there anyone there?" I repeated. "Did you ring the bell?"

A hoarse voice, quite unfamiliar to my ear, inquired in reply: "Are you the priest of this place?" From this I gathered that the man below was not one of our own people, and was probably not a Catholic, for the inhabitants of the neighboring village were chiefly Protestants. "I am not the pastor; I am his

curate. What do you want?" The answer came up from below. "The wife of the stationmaster at W— has sent me to beg you to come to the station immediately. A passenger was run over by the last train, both his legs were nearly cut off; at any rate they are completely crushed. The doctor has bound them up, but he says there is no hope. If you make haste, perhaps you will find him alive. The station master's wife says she is sure he is a Catholic, I myself am a Protestant you know."

I thanked and praised the man for taking the trouble to come so far on such a cold, dark night, and told him to return at once and say I would come as quickly as possible. I only wanted to ask where could find the sufferer, and whether he was conscious.

"You will find him in the third-class waiting room. We laid him on straw. He had not come to his senses when I left, but he may have by the time you get there—that is, if he ever does. It is a frightful accident, sir."

"That will do—all right. Thank you for coming! Tell them at the station I will be there directly." The heavy steps moved slowly down the path. I closed the window. As I hurried downstairs the light was carrying full on the countenance of the Mother of Sorrows; her statue stood there. Never did she look so grief-stricken. I fancied I saw the tears that filled her eyes. "There hangs the old house-bell. It did its duty bravely to-night; I must do mine."

At last I was out of the house. "Upon my word, the cold is frightful! Do not be silly, old fellow; turn up your coat collar. Wait a moment. Shall I take the Blessed Sacrament with me or not? Yes, perhaps it would be better. But the unfortunate man may not be able to make his confession. I must risk that. At any rate, I may as well be prepared, in case he is able."

The key grated as it turned in the lock. How still and peaceful it was in the church, while the wind howled outside and rustled among the dry leaves! There was the red light of the sanctuary lamp. My God, I adore Thee! Come, Behold Jesus, Thou Son of David! I, a soul whom Thou lovest is sick!" With the pyx containing the Bread of Life carefully hidden in my breast I trudged onward. In the quiet village all slept; in not a single window was a light to be seen. The high road was deserted. I quickened my pace; the Lord of Lords was with me, and a soul was trembling on the verge of eternity. Leaving the high road, I took a footpath across the fields, which brought me to the station. All was quiet there; the shrill scream of the engine was hushed, and there were no hurrying feet of the travelers on the platform. A light was burning in the third-class waiting room. I entered it. The table had been pushed to one side to make room in the not very spacious apartment. On it were a basin and some bandages. On the floor, stretched out on a bed of straw, lay a man in a light traveling suit; his legs were swathed in linen bandages. I shuddered as the dark stains on the boards met my eye.

Two sturdy looking porters were watching beside the injured man, who was still apparently unconscious. They rose on seeing me enter, and saluting me respectfully, left the room. Nothing had been prepared for my coming—none of the people in the station or in the immediate neighborhood were Catholics. So I cleared the space on the table whereon to deposit the pyx, and then bent down to the sufferer. As I gazed at his livid features a convulsive twitch, as of pain, suddenly passed over them. If only consciousness had returned!

"Can you hear me, my friend? Can you see me? I am close beside you—a priest. Can you hear what I say?"

There was no sign of life. I knelt down, put my hand under his head to raise it, and put my face close to his, and again attempted to make myself heard. I took his hand and gently pressed it; I passed my hand over his cold face, damp with the sweat of death. Again I endeavored to arouse him from his stupor, telling him I was a priest, and asking if he would not like to make his confession. I listened with deep anxiety, and watched his countenance intently, in the hope of discovering some ray of consciousness. All was still around me. I heard the loud ticking of the station clock outside, and the tramp of men, who, talking in subdued tones, were pacing up and down the station platform.

"Say, my child, shall we pray? If you cannot speak, never mind; only say 'your heart.' My Jesus, mercy! You hear me, do you not?"

A slight convulsion passed over his countenance, his hands moved, and a heavy sigh escaped his lips. "What is it?" I asked. "Did you say anything?" Again his lips quivered. Watching, listening intently, I caught a sound—a half articulate cry for "water." Thank God he was coming to! I hastened to take a carafe of water from the table, and, filling a glass, I held it to his lips. Consciousness had now fully returned. "My legs," he murmured, "my legs!" And presently, "My poor mother!" he ejaculated. "O my God! was that the moment

of grace? My duty was plain. He understood what I said, and was willing to make use of my ministry. His confession was made in the best dispositions. But would he be able to receive Holy Communion? Yes; to my joy, I found he could swallow easily; and reverently I placed the Sacred Host upon his tongue.

Thus, in the dead of night Our Lord, the Good Samaritan, came to this unfortunate traveller, who lay dying in that lonely place, far from all his friends, and took possession of his heart. But my duties were not over, and the time was short.

I administered Extreme Unction to the sufferer, at intervals repeating aloud a few short prayers; but he soon relapsed into a state of coma from exhaustion. I had done all I could, and I comforted myself with the thought that my duty was done, and that he was now prepared for his last journey. So I put up my stole and burse, and called in the men who were quietly waiting outside. With them came the wife of the station-master and her son. I was the first to break the silence. Addressing the lady, I said:

"I think it is you whom I have to thank for sending for me. I am much indebted to you for your kindness."

"Certainly, I felt bound to send for your reverence. The gentleman is a Catholic, is he not? You see when, after the accident, we turned out his pockets to see if there was anything by which to find out who he was, we found this. Is it not what you call a rosary? I thought directly the poor fellow must be a Catholic; so I sent off one of the men to fetch you."

"He did not ask for a priest then?" I inquired. "How could he?" interposed the young man. "Why, he was totally unconscious when we got him from under the wheels, and, unless he came to in a faint ever since."

I asked how the accident occurred, and was told that the traveller, who whom was found a ticket to a station a good way farther down the line, wanted to get out at this station, as the train stopped there for a few minutes, and on endeavoring to regain his place, just as the train was starting, he missed his footing, and fell upon the track; the wheels went over both legs above the knees, before the poor fellow could be rescued. So, having the rosary on his person was the means of procuring for him the ministrations of a priest. "What a singular chance!" the children of the world would say; but I saw in it the gracious interposition of Divine Providence and of the Mother of God.

Why have I related this incident in my ministerial career? To show the importance of carrying a rosary on one's person, and to afford a fresh example of the faithful and untiring care wherewith Our Lady watches over the salvation of her children.

To finish my narrative I will add that, with one of the porters and the station master's son, I remained beside the injured man. But he did not again recover consciousness. From time to time I breathed a word of comfort and encouragement, and acts of Faith, Hope and Charity in his ear, till about two o'clock I felt the approach of another, an unseen visitor, and the relentless hand of Death conducted the soul of the stranger into the land of eternity. Thus I witnessed the departure of this young man, a stranger to me, whose identity I never learned. He expired fortified with the Last Sacraments and all the consolations of our holy religion—the reward of devotion to the Rosary.

If, I said to myself as I walked home through the cold, dark night—if that poor fellow had not had his rosary in his pocket, no one would have known that he was a Catholic; no one would have sent two miles in the dead of night to summon a priest to his side. And if, when he came to himself, he had called for a priest, before one could have come the brief interval of consciousness would have been over. How much he owed to that rosary!

Instinctively I felt in my pockets to see if my beads were there. No; then I remembered having hung them at my bedside. Before very long I found myself once more at the door of the presbytery. I unlocked it, and locked it again as quietly as I could, and glancing up at the house-bell, could not refrain from formulating a fervent prayer that it might not ring again that night. As I crept up the stairs, the light in my hand illuminated the sorrowful features of the Mother of Sorrows. On her knees lay her Crucified Son. I thought of the dead stranger whom I had left in the lonely waiting-room at the station. He more than once had exclaimed: "My poor mother!"

As I stepped into my little chamber, which felt snug and warm after the cold air without and laid the burse and stole down on my prie dieu, the words: "From sudden and unprovided death, O Lord, deliver us!" escaped my lips. And—where is my dear Rosary? She is at my bed's head. Before I fell asleep—and fatigue prevented me from doing so for a long time—I took down my beads and placed them under my pillow, and the words of the good woman at the station recurred to my mind: "Is it not what you call a rosary?" The next morning when I was at last roused from a heavy slumber, and the events of the night crowded

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